

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT,
PROFESSIONAL ROLE INTEGRATION, AND PERSONAL STYLE
ON THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS OF
SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISORS

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1985

Complex organizational and technological developments have markedly influenced social service delivery in the '80s. Social work supervision, too, has been impacted by the developments in the profession. As middle managers, social work supervisors span the boundaries between clients, workers, and upper-level administrators -- a position that is frequently conflictual in nature (Perlmutter, 1983). The management of conflict, then, is a key factor in the successful enactment of contemporary supervisory positions in social work.

There is competing evidence to suggest that conflict management styles are variously influenced by environmental, interactional, and intrapsychic processes (Moos, 1976; Hall, 1972; Gizynski, 1978). Although each view has been supported by compelling evidence, consistent with the reported experience of social work supervisors, each approach is atomistic. That is, each perspective, when considered alone, provides only a uni-dimensional view. The study reported here explored the possible interdependence of these influences.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight major findings of a national study of social work supervisors in their attitude roles and their styles of managing conflict (Conrad, 1984). The central question guiding the study was: What are the major predictors of conflict management styles in social work supervisors? The broad purpose of the study was to discover the impact of organizational, personal, and professional factors influencing the conflict management styles of social work supervisors.

Overview of the Literature

The growing body of literature on supervision in social work reflected a wide range of professional interests including management issues, clinical aspects, and teaching-learning concerns. During the '70s, there was an increasing number of journal articles and books on these topics; and since the '80s, five new books (Austin, 1981; Shulman, 1982; Joseph and Conrad, 1982; Munson, 1983; Gambrill and Stein, 1983) and an interdisciplinary journal devoted entirely to clinical supervision have emerged (The Clinical Supervisor). Although descriptive content was most frequent, there were important research contributions (Kledaras, 1971; Kadushin, 1974; Murdough, 1974; Rosenblatt and Mayer, 1975; Shulman, 1982) as well.

Similar to the descriptive and research literature, theoretical content was diffuse and drawn from a wide range of conceptual perspectives and operationalized for practice at varying levels of abstraction. Analyses of the theoretical contributions were of special interest in this review since contemporary trends in theory development provided an organizing perspective for construction of the theoretical framework on which this research was based. Prior to the 1960s, literature on supervision was pragmatically oriented toward practice issues, drawing upon Freudian and Rankian psychodynamic theory, cognitive learning theory, and ego psychology (Joseph, 1982; Munson, 1983). The first explicit attempt to systematically conceptualize supervision was reported by Berl (1960). He used a social systems framework to identify the institutional, methodological, educational, and psychological components; specific functions of each component were described; and goals, stages of development, and the interrelationships between each component were specified. Role theory was the underlying theory applied to the analysis

of the supervisor-supervisee relationship by Burn (1967). Parsonian role systems theory was adapted to analyze mutual role expectations of supervisors and supervisees by Streat (1969), to the study of role conflict in staff supervisors and supervisees by Kledaris (1974), and to structure supervision practice methodologies by Wijnberg and Schwartz (1977). Socialization theory was used by Patti and Austin (1977) as a framework for identifying professional career patterns of movement from direct practice positions to supervisory positions. Cohen and Rhodes (1977) presented a management study based on Herzberg's Two Factor Theory (work orientation versus maintenance orientation typology) which assessed the management skills of social work supervisors. And Kadushin (1974), claiming an eclectic perspective, used extensive literature from social work and related fields of practice to elaborate essential components of supervisory practice -- administration, education, and support.

These theoretical contributions tended to be developed in isolation from one another with little explicit effort to build on previous or existing theory development. However, a definite trend toward the use of symbolic interactionism emerged in the supervision literature of the '80s. Shulman's (1982) model, adapting the concepts of mediation and development from Schartz's group work approach, emphasized the importance of open communication between supervisor, supervisee, and the agency system. Munson (1983), using an interaction perspective, pointed to the importance of egalitarian relationships in supervision. Joseph and Conrad (1982) developed an interactional approach in which each component (administration, education, and support) was differentially conceived as stemming from interaction-compatible theories. These included interactional administrative theory, an adult learning model, and a social competence model, respectively.

In assessing these conceptual influences on supervision theory, it became clear that role theory and interaction theory (both mid-range theories in terms of levels of abstraction) have influenced recent supervision theory.

The Theoretical Framework

The interactional theme emerging in the literature provided an organizing perspective for the present research. For the purpose of the research, the conflict management styles used in supervisory practice were conceptualized as being influenced by the self system of the supervisors and the organizational system or work setting in which professional exchanges occurred. The self system used here combines both professional role integration and the personal style of the supervisor. Implicit in this construct is the assumption that, as systems, both professional role and personal style are permeable -- open to the influence of other systems, and both have the potential for ongoing development (Berrien, 1968). In this view, personal style shapes the role behavior of social work supervisors. Further, the study conceived dynamic role theory (Sarbin and Allen, 1968) as a conceptual bridge for understanding the energy exchange between systems -- in this case, the self system and the organizational system. Therefore, conflict management styles were operationalized through the use of role coping concepts.

The Study Methodology

The overall design for this national study of social work supervisors was a multivariate correlational analysis of the factors influencing conflict management styles. More specifically, the theoretical model operationalized in this study consisted of the dependent variable, conflict management styles, and the three major independent variables -- personal style, professional role integration, and organizational context. Other important independent variables examined were satisfaction, role conflict, burnout, and self-role congruence. These additional variables, through analysis, proved to be very significant to the focus of the study.

The study population was a systematic stratified sample of 328 supervisors drawn from a national list of 2286 professionally trained and experienced social workers included in the National Association of Social Workers Clinical Directory (1982). The research instrument, a twenty-two-page questionnaire, was composed primarily of closed and a few open-ended items formulated to discover (1) identifying information about the respondents; (2) information about their professional training and experience; (3) data about the agency or organization in which they supervised; (4) data related to their supervisory style and methodology; (5) information about their own personal styles of relating to others. The study included one hundred forty-nine usable questionnaires, or a net response rate of 62%.

The dependent variable, conflict management style, was defined as behaviors used in dealing with problems in the supervisory position. The measures used in this study were based on behavioral reports and operationalized a four-fold model of coping developed by Joseph, et al. (1980). This model included environmental style, personal-active style, role redefinition, and passive style. The environmental, or active, style involves dealing directly with the environment and negotiating conflict with significant others; personal-active style demands reprioritization and modification of expectations; role redefinition involves dropping aspects of the role, or in the extreme, abandoning the position; and reactive coping includes attempting to meet all aspects or responding passively. Scales operationalizing each style, consisting of four to six items, were rated on a five-point summated rating index. Reliability coefficients using Cronback Alpha ranged from .77 to .70 for all scales except the personal-active style. Findings from this scale were interpreted guardedly because of the .53 coefficient. Factor analysis of all items established the construct validity of these scales with each scale loading on a distinct factor.

As indicated, the major independent variables included personal style, professional role integration, and organizational context. Personal Style, as conceived for this study, was based on a Jungian approach to personality which measured the more stable expressions of perception and judgment. Briefly, this approach combines extrovert-introvert orientations and the polar functions of sensation-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving. These personality traits were operationalized in this study through a sixteen-category standardized instrument -- the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (1982). Reliability coefficients for each dimension ranged from .71 to .81.

Professional Role Integration was conceived as a unified behavior essential to carry out the administrative, educational, and support functions of supervision. Conceptually, it referred to the mutuality (the degree to which behaviors of one role reinforce behavior in

other roles), compatibility (the degree to which behaviors for each role were reported as non-contradictory) and overlap (the degree to which supervisors reported that the behaviors of one role permeated or penetrated the behaviors of other roles in role enactment) of the supervisory functions. As developed for this study, it consisted of eight items rated on a five-point scale. The reliability coefficient was .83.

Organizational Context was conceived as the constellation of essential structural, functional, and value dimensions which define an organization. It was operationally defined through a nine-item semantic differential index originally constructed for the study. It measured the bi-polar organizational-professional orientation of the organization on a five-point range with respect to: (1) locus of authority; (2) goals; (3) work/task orientation; (4) communication; (5) position; (6) decision-making; (7) relationship orientation; (8) orientation to effectiveness; and (9) value orientation. The reliability coefficient was .92.

The Major Study Findings

Analyses of these data surfaced profiles of the socio-demographic and personal styles of the respondents; their preparation for supervision ; their current supervisory positions, as well as the characteristics of their work settings. A differential structure of conflict management styles emerged as a central finding of the study with the degree of role satisfaction being a central predictor of the preferred conflict management style of social work supervisors. Highlights of central findings are presented here.

Profile of the Supervisors

The supervisors were between the ages of 31 and 71 years, with the largest proportion being in the 35-44 age group. Almost two-thirds were women, and a similar proportion were married. Nearly half practiced social work supervision in the Northeast region of the United States. In personal style, the majority were clearly outgoing (extroverted) and inclined to place closure on an issue (judging). In personal style, over half tended toward being predominantly intuitive, while the other half were more inclined to be sensate (concrete). They were evenly divided in their preferences for thinking and feeling.

Almost all of the supervisors in this study had completed MSW education -- the largest proportion, during the '60s and '70s. Almost two-thirds specialized in direct practice/casework/clinical practice modalities. As a group, they had an average of over six years' experience, although half had less than five years. Almost all had prepared themselves for supervision through agency and university-based workshops and seminars as well as administrative/management training. Each supervisor had participated in an average of two programs geared to preparation for supervisory practice. These social workers had a rich background of supervisory experience ranging from one to forty years with an average of 12 years each. Clearly, these supervisors were academically and experientially prepared for the profession and had made efforts to prepare themselves for supervisory practice as well.

The majority of the respondents, over four-fifths, were employed on a full-time basis and all carried supervisory responsibilities in their work settings. By title, only one-fifth were known as supervisors, while the largest proportion held direct service titles

such as caseworker or clinician, and one-third carried administrative titles. Interestingly, only 20 percent reported supervision as their predominant practice role. For the majority of the respondents, then, supervision was a part-time practice role to which they devoted one or two days per week. Only one-fifth spent three to five days supervising. The balance of their time was spent most frequently in direct practice, with lesser amounts of time devoted to administration and/or practice.

These supervisors practiced in a wide range of agency settings, the most predominant being mental health. Others practiced supervision in family service, health care, and private practice settings. Only a small proportion practiced in each of the fields of child service, college counseling, school social work, public social services, gerontology, substance abuse, corrections, social work education, and rehabilitation.

As middle-managers, the supervisors could be expected to function most readily as natural stabilizers of organizational systems and as facilitators of positive work climates (according to the Keirsey Temperament Sorter). A smaller proportion could be classified as natural visionaries or builders. Most impressive, and distressing in view of the complexity of their roles, was the finding that no study respondents had natural negotiator styles.

Profile of the Work Settings

The work settings in which these supervisors practiced could best be described as functionally diverse, organizationally complex, and staffed by interdisciplinary personnel. These data showed that supervisors had been employed in these settings from one to forty years with an average of almost ten years. Over half were employed from five to fourteen years -- since the 1970s. For the majority of the supervisors, over two-thirds, the supervisory role was one of the regular staff positions in the work settings. However, an additional one-third of the supervisors either combined agency supervision with private contractual arrangements or supervised entirely by contractual arrangement. These findings support the direction reported in the literature that private contractual supervision is emerging as an important trend (Kaslow, 1977; Wallace, 1982).

Organizational sponsorship varied among the agencies. Almost half the agencies described here were privately sponsored, while almost two-fifths were sponsored by public funds. Almost ten percent were church-sponsored, and a lesser five percent had mixed public/private sponsorship. Interestingly, the agencies in this study had been established during various periods of the development of social services -- over one-quarter, during the '40s and '50s expansion of public services; over two-fifths during the great society era; and less than ten percent since the current neo-conservative era of the '80s. The proportions of agencies initiated during each period seemed to parallel societal openness to service provision, with the great society era being the period of most extensive initiation and the neo-conservative period representing the least frequent initiation.

Analysis of the agency staffing patterns showed that the number of social workers in agencies varied from one to over 99, with one to four social workers being the most frequent proportion. However, two-fifths worked with an even larger number of professionals from other disciplines -- reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary human service agencies. Top-level administrative and departmental staffing patterns, too, showed an interdisciplinary trend. Social workers were more likely to

occupy middle-management positions, such as department head, while professionals from related disciplines and from management science were almost as likely as social workers to hold top-level administrative positions.

Analysis of the Study Variables

When the standardized scale means (based on a 1-5 range) of the conflict management styles were examined, the active styles -- personal-active (3.91) and environmental conflict management (3.63) -- were the most predominant styles used. The passive style was utilized less frequently (3.10) and role redefinition was least likely to be used (2.26). These findings indicate that, as a group, the supervisors tended to make moderate use of active and passive coping styles and to use low levels of role redefinition. Further, they showed moderate levels of professional role integration (3.50), perceived their organizational context as neither strongly professional nor strongly organizational (3.13), showed moderately high satisfaction with their work situations (3.92), and perceived their personal or self attributes as moderately congruent with their work roles (3.47). Further, they showed surprisingly low levels of role conflict (2.03) and burnout (1.81) when the diversity and ambiguity of their work settings are considered.

The Study Hypotheses

As the correlation matrix in Figure A indicates, the study hypothesis that the more intuitive the supervisor, the more environmentally he/she would cope was not supported at the .05 level of significance. However, the relationship was in the predicted direction showing a relationship between intuitive personal style and environmental conflict management ($r = .11$; $p = .092$). Further, those who scored higher on intuitive personal style showed a negative relationship ($r = -.16$) with the passive style. This means that, although (from a statistically-significant perspective) intuitive type supervisors did not cope any more actively than more sensate (concrete) types, they were less inclined to manage conflict passively. The reverse was also true; sensate types were more inclined to cope passively with a style characterized by continuing the work role regardless of problems, waiting for time to pass, and avoidance of conflict or confrontation.

The hypothesis that more professionally-integrated supervisors would manage conflict with a more environmental style was supported ($r = .28$), although weakly. More importantly, high professional role integration had a stronger association ($r = .42$) with self-role congruence (the fit between the personal interests of the supervisor and the role requirements), with work satisfaction ($r = .38$), and a negative association with burnout ($-.35$) and role conflict ($-.19$).

The prediction that the more professionally oriented the work setting or organizational context, the higher the degree of environmental conflict management the supervisor would use was also supported, although weakly ($r = .16$). Similar to the professional integration scale, organizational context held a stronger positive association with satisfaction ($r = .43$) and a stronger negative association with burnout ($r = -.41$) than with any of the coping styles. This indicated that the more professionally-oriented work settings were also associated with greater satisfaction for supervisors and lower symptoms of burnout, such as lack of enthusiasm, feelings of overwork and hopelessness, and disengagement from the role. The professionally-oriented organizational context was also

associated with increased self-role congruence ($r = .20$) and reduced role conflict ($r = -.29$).

Finally, the multivariate hypothesis that the higher the degree of professional role integration and the more professionally oriented the organization and the more personally intuitive the supervisor, the higher the degree of environmental conflict management he/she would utilize was supported. This combination of predictors accounted for 12% of the variance in environmental conflict management. However, professional role integration was the only statistically-significant predictor in the regression model, indicating that the bi-variate analysis previously presented showing the relationship between environmental style and professional role integration was the most parsimonious analytical model.

The Structure of Conflict Management

In view of the statistically-significant relationships between the related variables (satisfaction, burnout, role conflict, and self-role congruence) and both the dependent and independent variables, it was decided to examine the data further through path analyses (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973). The purpose of this form of analyses was to test whether an alternate theoretical model holding that key intervening variables mediating between the hypothesized dependent and independent variables could be statistically supported.

As Figure B indicates, the alternate model presents causal paths explaining the differential structures of environmental conflict management and role redefinition. Statistical relationships with the personal-active and passive styles were not sufficiently strong to support rigorous analysis. As presented here, supervisor satisfaction directly affected environmental conflict management, and indirectly affected role redefinition through its effect on burnout. In fact, satisfaction and role conflict taken together accounted for 52% of the variance in burnout. Interestingly, the major study variables -- organizational context and professional role integration -- together with self-role congruence accounted for 44% of the variance in satisfaction. Thus, satisfaction was an intervening variable mediating the relationship of the independent variables -- professional role integration and organizational context -- with environmental conflict management. Also, satisfaction together with burnout and role conflict mediated the relationship of the same independent variables with role redefinition.

Conclusion

A central focus of this study was on identifying factors that influenced the conflict management styles of social work supervisors. Clearly, professional-organizational tensions exist in contemporary social work settings. The data showed that these tensions, combined with the ability of the supervisors to integrate their professional roles and the congruence of the person with the supervisory role, were major predictors of the work satisfaction of the supervisors. A major finding of the study was that satisfaction had a pivotal influence on the selection of conflict management styles. Significantly, the personal style of the supervisor had minimal influence on conflict management and, surprisingly, no persons with natural negotiator styles were found in the study population. These findings point to the urgent need for training in conflict management for social work supervisors and, more importantly, for students at the master's level of social work

education who will very likely move into supervisory positions within two years of graduation.

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